What happens if Michigan shuts off Ontario's propane pipeline?

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Byline: Alex Ballingall Toronto Star

Body

A crucial deadline looms for the fate of the Line 5.

The oil pipeline provides much of the fuel used for home heating and gassing up across southern Ontario. But the U.S. state of Michigan is pushing to shut it down on May 12.

Here's everything you need to know about the situation.

What is Line 5?

The pipeline has been in use since 1953 and carries up to 540,000 barrels per day of Canadian crude oil and natural gas liquids from Superior, Wisc. to Sarnia, Ont. These fuels are refined into propane, gasoline, jet fuel and more at facilities in Ontario, Quebec and four U.S. states.

Why does Michigan

want to shut it down?

Last November, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer pulled the authorization for the pipeline that was granted when it was built 68 years ago. At issue is a 50-kilometre stretch that runs under the Straits of Mackinac, a busy freshwater shipping lane that connects Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. Whitmer's office has said that section of the pipeline presents an unacceptable risk of an oil spill and gave Enbridge until May 12 to shut it down.

The state has prior experience with oil spills. In July 2010, another oil pipeline operated by Enbridge burst and dumped at least 4.6 million litres of oil into a tributary of the Kalamazoo River.

Responding to concerns about the aging pipeline, Enbridge is planning to build a $620-million upgrade that would tunnel a replacement into the lake bed under the straits - a project that was approved by Whitmer's predecessor as governor. The company calls this project the "common-sense solution" to the dispute.

What happens if

they turn off the taps?

The pipeline is a crucial conduit of oil and gas supplies to Ontario and Quebec. A parliamentary committee studying the situation reported in April that Line 5 is the only pipeline that supplies propane to southern Ontario. It also cited the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which stated that central Canada's supplies of gasoline, heating fuel and jet fuel "depend on Line 5."

If the pipeline is shut down, this fuel would likely be transported through other means. The federal Natural Resources Department told the committee it expects 2,100 tanker trucks and 800 rail cars would be needed each day to make up for the lost pipeline.

Enbridge has also warned the shutdown could cause fuel shortages in the provinces and states served by the pipeline, and said in a statement to the Star on Friday that there are no alternatives to "readily substitute" for Line 5 if it shuts down.

But the company said it won't turn off the taps unless a U.S. court or energy regulator orders it to do so - a scenario it considers "highly unlikely."

What can Canada

do about it?

A court-ordered mediation between Enbridge and Michigan is going on in the U.S. right now. In its April report, the parliamentary committee recommended Ottawa push both sides to settle the issue.

But if no agreement can be found, the committee called on the federal government to step into the legal dispute and submit a brief in court that includes the government's position, that cross-border pipelines are protected under a 1977 agreement between Canada and the United States.

The committee also called on Ottawa to develop contingency plans to ensure oil continues to be delivered to Ontario and Quebec.

Asked whether the government has a plan in place, a spokesperson for Natural Resources Minister Seamus O'Regan pointed to a speech he made in the House of Commons on Thursday night.

O'Regan vowed "people will not be left out in the cold" but that if oil is shipped by train and truck, it will "unquestionably" be less safe and result in more greenhouse gas emissions than if it were shipped in the pipeline.

What's the political context?

The threatened shutdown comes amidst a concerted push from the U.S. Democratic Party for stronger climate action. It also comes after U.S. President Joe Biden revoked permits for construction of the Keystone XL pipeline in January.

In Canada, tensions between Ottawa and conservative premiers in Alberta and Saskatchewan are also a factor. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney has called the potential shutdown of Line 5 "devastating."

But not everyone on the Canadian side is upset with Michigan. The leadership of the Anishinabek Nation - representing 39 First Nations in Ontario - announced this week that it supports the state's push to shut down Line 5 and opposes Enbridge's tunnelling project.

CORRECTION: The Line 5 oil pipeline runs for about seven kilometres under the Straits of Mackinac which links Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. The distance was misstated in a May 8 article about efforts by the State of Michigan to shut it down. (May 12, 2021, page A2)

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